

## **Protocol of Congressional Visits for Scientist-Activists** (Marguerite A. Toscano, Ph.D.<sup>\*</sup>)

Scientists as a group are not known to be vocal about science policy issues or the state of government appropriations for science. It will never be the case that high levels of science funding or excellent science policy decisions can be taken for granted. Without consistent, ongoing, long-term lobbying on the part of scientist-activists, congress will not retain the message that R&D funding is essential to our national prosperity, competitiveness in world markets, and stature. Without the availability and dedication of scientist-constituents, they will not be able to obtain the information they need to formulate and legislate sound science policy.

Scientists need to make some time each year to visit their members of congress in their home offices and to bring specific concerns for science funding and science policy to their attention. Scientist-constituents who can further assist their members by making themselves available as a resource have a greater chance of influencing funding and policy voting. Most congressional staffers are lawyers; hence a local scientist can be invaluable to them when they need information or a referral to an appropriate expert. As a scientist-constituent, your views have weight and potential power. It is very effective to visit all members of congress in your state, particularly those that are on “the other side” of your issue.

The most effective approach when visiting is to voice concerns about specific legislation or certain research and development appropriations. Don't be afraid to request that members take your expert views under advisement when they vote on specific bills. Do bring a one or two page handout giving actual scientific evidence to support your case.

In order to assure a successful and productive visit to your representative or Senator's office, use these ten “rules” (provided by a staffer) and be extremely well prepared and well versed in the issues you plan to discuss. Remember that your message must be coherent and succinct.

- 1. If you are going in a group, decide on a principal spokesperson.** This does not mean that the others can't speak, but a well-prepared, extremely articulate spokesperson will provide some structure to the discussion and keep the message organized.
- 2. Always make an appointment, and be prompt, patient and flexible.** Even if you are on time, you can't account for things that come up that might make the staffer or member late in seeing you. If *you* are going to be late, call the office and let them know.
- 3. Be an anecdote, not the whole story.** (See credibility issue - #10 below)
- 4. Approach the visit as a dialogue, not a lecture.** If it is apparent that you don't respect the staffer's or Member's point of view, you will get nowhere. This is a situation where we have to

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drop some of our unfortunate training as scientists – that of being rigid and adversarial in discussions on issues.

**5. Don't insult the hand that feeds you.** You should expect to be seen by a large proportion of younger staffers, persons in their 20's, particularly. It is ill-advised to pre-judge them due to their youth – most are impressive, articulate, and willing to listen and interact with scientists. The vast majority of all staffers will be pleased with any printed materials you prepare for them, and they will ask pertinent questions and take notes.

**6. If you see a member alone, follow up with a staffer. Get the staffer's card and maintain the dialogue.** This is something you should have done prior to the visit. Members of Congress believe that most scientists know neither their members' names nor the names of their staffers in charge of science issues. They are probably right.

**7. Leave sooner than later.** Keep it short, especially if you are “preaching to the choir” or someone who is obviously sympathetic to your position. This leads to another issue, that scientists should make a point of visiting all their members, even those that are not as friendly to science spending or have competing agendas. It is those members we need to convince, obviously.

**8. Don't be a one-shot deal.** Scientists are constituents who vote, and they need to interact with their own Representatives and Senators regularly, cultivate science staffers, visit them in their district and state offices, and make additional appointments. This needs to be done for the foreseeable future. We cannot expect to lobby for a few years and then be able to stop. We will never succeed in keeping a high level of science funding “on auto-pilot.”

**9. If you don't know it, don't fudge it.** Staffers ask questions, so preparedness is essential. Know the bill numbers, the activity the bill has seen, where it now stands, etc (see “Useful Websites” below, especially the Library of Congress site). Have hard data at your fingertips. If you are asked a question for which you do not have a definitive, correct answer, don't fake it. Staffers will sense it and you will look foolish. Say you don't know the answer or don't have the specifics, but you will be happy to get the information/data and send it on later.

**10. Credibility, once lost, is very hard to regain.** This can be applied to all our endeavors.

**Useful websites:** <http://thomas.loc.gov/> is the Library of Congress gateway to all pending legislation, committee rosters, congress, and the Congressional Record. This is the place to look up bills and their history and status. It has a very easy “search” function for key words.

For the American Geological Institute Government Affairs Program (AGI GAP), go to <http://www.agiweb.org/gap/gaphome.html>. This site has a number of useful links, including <http://www.agiweb.org/roster/howto.html> <http://www.agiweb.org/gap/websites.html> and <http://www.agiweb.org/cvd/>

For other Government resources, go to <http://www.access.gpo.gov/>. This is the U. S. Government Printing Office website, listing all available publications on numerous topics.